

## OBITUARY NOTICE.

JOHN HENRY COSTE.

1871—1949.

JOHN HENRY COSTE died suddenly at his home at Smallfield, near Horley, Surrey, on January 3rd, 1949, in his 78th year.

He was born at Clerkenwell, London, on April 8th, 1871, and received his scientific education at Finsbury Technical College under Professor Meldola for whose work and teaching abilities he often expressed, in his later years, his very great admiration. Coste's passing reduces still further the dwindling number of old Finsbury students who subsequently made their mark in the scientific world. On leaving the college in 1891 he worked for three years in the laboratories of John Augustus Voelcker mainly on agricultural and allied problems, and on March 19th, 1894, he joined the staff of the Chemical and Gas Testing Department of the London County Council which, in 1889, had succeeded the Metropolitan Board of Works as the principal governing body of London outside the City, and, indeed, exercised some powers in the City itself. The Chief Chemist at that time was William Joseph Dibdin—a descendent of the author of "Tom Bowling"—whose pioneer work in developing the bacterial treatment for the disposal of sewage will always be remembered by those concerned with that service. Coste's abilities were soon recognised, and when some years later Dibdin resigned and Professor Frank Clowes (from Nottingham) was appointed in his stead, Coste became chief assistant. He held this position until 1912, when the Chemical and Gas Testing Department was abolished as a separate entity, the work being split up and divided between other departments. The bulk of it went to the relatively new Public Health Department, and Coste from that time until his retirement from the service in 1936 filled the position which subsequently became entitled Chemist-in-Chief; he was also appointed Official Agricultural Analyst for the County of London.

Coste was a long-standing Fellow of the Chemical Society, having been elected in 1893. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Chemistry and a Fellow of Institute of Physics, and served on the Council of the former and also on that of the Society of Public Analysts. For a period he was Secretary of the London Section of the Society of Chemical Industry, and also served on a number of Government and other committees.

Coste's field of scientific work covered a very wide range, as indeed was essential having regard to the scope of activities of the London County Council. He was the author or part author of many papers, most of which appeared through the years in the *Analyst* or the *Journal of the Society of Chemical Industry*. A few may be mentioned: commercial Prussian-blue (1896), the examination of turpentine and turpentine substitutes (1908), the composition of painters' driers (1910), the examination of mixtures containing petroleum (1912), the electrical conductivity of milk (1919), the absorption of atmospheric gases by water (1923), modern methods of sewage disposal (1927), specification for enamelled hollow-ware (1935), chemical and biological considerations affecting the control of swimming baths (1935), and nature of the nucleus in hygroscopic droplets (1935). He was also the author of a book on the calorific power of gas, and part author of two others, one on fuel and one on paint and paint pigments.

During his later years in active service Coste was probably most keenly interested in two subjects allied to public health—sewage disposal and atmospheric pollution—and he continued his work on atmospheric pollution at his home after his retirement. He was one of the original members of the research committee (which was set up at the time of the First World War) under the aegis of the Meteorological Office which later was reconstituted on its present basis as the Atmospheric Pollution Research Committee of the Fuel Research Board, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

Coste maintained his active interest in scientific affairs throughout his thirteen years of retirement up to the time of his sudden death. He had the outlook of the true scientist, and was able to combine this research viewpoint with the essentially practical one which is so necessary in the local government service to which almost all his working years were devoted; he was, moreover, a keen experimenter.

He was of a kindly nature and always approachable and willing to help and advise his

colleagues on any problem which arose. He had a fund of entertaining reminiscences, relating back to his early years, which painted for his younger colleagues a vivid picture of the personalities of the chemists of those days and the conditions and limitations under which they worked. Only a few days before his sudden passing he was amongst us for a Christmas season celebration, and seemed as hale and active as ever. His death came thus as an unexpected shock. He leaves a widow and four married children—two sons and two daughters.

C. J. REGAN.